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Title: Farmers face double whammy - Expect pricier fruits, veggies

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Lead:

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A hot and dry spring and summer means that you'll see less local produce - some of it at higher prices, some of it of poorer quality - at farmers markets and roadside stands across Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky.

The heat and lack of water have turned lettuce and berries bitter. Prices for some produce might be higher because irrigation bills are soaring for fruit and vegetable farmers, who could pass the costs along to consumers.

The weather conditions also will limit the size of some crops - or even wipe them out at some farms. Sweet corn and potatoes that aren't growing, for example, will be left on the stalk or in the ground and plowed over to fertilize the next crop.

"When we talk about price, it's more a matter of availability - you won't be able to find a lot," said Tim Woods, an agricultural economist at the University of Kentucky, adding that consumers might want to phone ahead before heading out to pick-your-own farms.

The scorching weather has come as another blow to farmers after a late spring freeze.

The one-two punch has wiped out as much as 75 percent of the region's fruit crops in many areas.

"We got hit with a left and a right," Woods said.

Dry conditions are destroying as much as half of Ohio's and Kentucky's small-fruit crops - blackberries, blueberries, raspberries and strawberries, Woods said. This is after most of the region's apples, peaches and pears were devastated by the late frost.

Because most fruits and vegetables grown in Ohio and Kentucky find their way to farmers markets and not supermarkets, those venues will bear the brunt of the impact, Woods said.

There might be an incremental increase in fruit and vegetable prices as supermarkets bring in more produce from other states, he said.

Fruits and vegetables account for less than 5 percent of cash receipts for Ohio farmers and less than 1 percent for Kentucky farmers, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture statistics.

Irrigation has been crucial for Jim Rosselot in saving his tomato crop. But the owner of Gravel Knolls Farm in West Chester said his water bill for May jumped to \$500 from about \$80 a year ago.

"Normally, we don't start irrigating until June," he said. "Tomatoes love hot weather - they look great. Obviously, we watered them a lot."

Still, the weather has whittled his potato crop down to a quarter of its usual size, and he is concerned about his sweet corn's prospects this year. His first planting of corn from late April is sprouting well enough - but subsequent plantings are lagging, poking only a few inches out of the ground.

Constant irrigation also saved the tomatoes at Neltner's Farm and Greenhouses in Melbourne, where the crop is on par with last year.

"Without irrigation, it wouldn't have been possible this year," said Kevin Neltner, co-owner of the farm.

Neltner said his raspberry crop is smaller this year because of the drought - and it's making it late, too.

Bob Pickford, president of Findlay Market, said the dry spell is slowing the appearance of local growers at the Over-the-Rhine market.

"Some growers had to replant crops, others saw delayed maturation," he said. "Many plants basically go into hibernation if they don't get enough water."

Brad Bergefurd, an extension fruit and vegetable specialist with Ohio State University, said the price impact from the weather woes will be hard to separate this year from farmers' rising costs in general.

"What the consumer is feeling now are the increased costs of inputs - the increases of gas costs, fertilizer, seed prices," he said, adding that drought conditions have more dramatic effects on the prices of field corn and soybeans.

Meanwhile, the National Weather Service's Wilmington office said Thursday in its weekly hydrologic outlook that "while recent rain has continued to reduce the (Ohio Valley's) rainfall deficits, regular rainfall of nearly an inch per week over the next month and near-to-below-normal temperatures" would be needed to bring the region out of drought.

The weather service forecasts that the drought - classified as severe in much of Southwest Ohio and Northern Kentucky, with soil moisture running 70 percent below normal - will continue locally at least into September.

A lingering drought could make pumpkin crops wither and hurt berry crops into next year as vines fail to spread enough to sustain themselves through the winter, said John String, an extension fruit and vegetable specialist with University of Kentucky.

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